

Remarks at a United States Chamber of Commerce Reception in New Orleans

April 21, 2008

I want to thank the band for giving me a chance to relive my youth. *[Laughter]* I've had many a fine day here in New Orleans and a pretty good night too. *[Laughter]* And it's great to be back. I want to thank the U.S. Chamber for hosting this reception in honor of the North American leaders' summit between Canada, the United States, and Mexico. And for all of you here from Canada and Mexico, welcome to New Orleans, one of America's greatest cities.

I chose to host this summit in New Orleans for a variety of reasons, one of which is, for centuries, this city has been a place where commerce and culture from across the globe have come together—one of the really great international cities in the United States. And once again, New Orleans now steps on the international scene, where it should be.

I want to thank Tom for hosting the deal, and I want to thank all the members of the U.S. Chamber for being here tonight. I thank members of the North American Competitiveness Council for being here—looking forward to meeting with you in the morning.

I want to thank the Governor of the great State of Louisiana, Bobby Jindal, and the first lady for being here. My old buddy the mayor—Mayor Nagin is here. Mr. Mayor, it's great to see you. We have spent some quality time together—*[laughter]*—including on the deck of the USS *Iwo Jima*—yes, nonalcohol beer for me. *[Laughter]*

I thank all the State and local officials. I particularly want to say thanks to the Senators from Louisiana for joining us today. Mary Landrieu—thanks for coming, Senator. David Vitter—Senator, it's good to have you here. Thanks for coming. Congressman William Jefferson—thanks for being here, Jeff. Appreciate you being here. I thank the—thanks for coming.

One thing is for certain: New Orleans has come a long way since Hurricane Katrina hit. It—and we've tried to do our part at the Federal level. We spent over \$120 billion to help the gulf coast recover. The money has helped rebuild a school system, a dilapidated school

system, that is now better than before. The money has helped improve the criminal justice system. The money has helped to rebuild highways. The money has helped to strengthen storm surge protection systems so people can feel comfortable living here.

New Orleans faces immense challenges. There's still a lot of work to be done. But there's a lot of hope in this city. I mean, you can see it in the face of the teachers. You can see hope in the jobs that are being created. There's a lot of entrepreneurial spirit in New Orleans. You can see hope in the fact that people are absolutely determined to rebuild this city better than it was before.

And so for all of you who have contributed to New Orleans's resurgence, I want to thank you on behalf of a grateful nation.

This is an important summit. It gives three friends a chance to come together to discuss our commitment to security and prosperity. It's a chance to reconfirm the need for the three of us to work in harmony together for the good of our peoples. It's a chance to talk about how we can best protect our people and extend prosperity. And one of the best ways to do that is through trade.

The people of Louisiana understand the benefits of trade firsthand. While many sectors of the economy were hit hard by Katrina, exports were a source of strength. And they continue to be in the years since. I don't know if a lot of people know this, but exports from Louisiana surpassed \$30 billion in the year 2007—that would be \$30 billion for the first time ever. And a lot of these exports come through New Orleans, which is a source for jobs and hope.

And the fundamental question is, will we continue to be a nation that believes in free and fair trade? Canada and Mexico are our two most important trading partners. Since the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect, an agreement I strongly support, trade between the United States, Mexico, and Canada has more than tripled, and our economies have grown by more than 50 percent.

One of the challenges for the North American Competitiveness Council is to find unnecessary regulations that prohibit the free flow of trade. And so tomorrow the leaders at the Council will come forth with specific

recommendations. And I'm looking forward to hearing them, and I'm looking forward to implementing them.

The United States has an opportunity to continue a trading agenda. As a matter of fact, we have an opportunity with three important countries: Colombia, South Korea, and Panama. Interestingly enough, all three of these countries are among Louisiana's top 10 foreign markets for exports. These agreements will be good for New Orleans's workers and businesses. And the mayor recognized that. He wrote a letter to our Speaker—wrote a letter to our Speaker, who is the leader in the Congress, and here's what he said: "Each of the future free trade agreements would provide unique opportunities for the city of New Orleans to increase international economic development."

Unfortunately, we had a setback in a very important free trade agreement with Colombia. The Speaker made a decision to block the free trade agreement. It's unfortunate decision, and the deal is dead unless she changes her mind. And that's bad for American workers, and it's bad for our security, and it's bad for the people here in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The economic argument for free trade with Colombia is very clear. Almost all Colombian products now enter America duty free, yet many of our products face steep tariffs in Colombia. Now think about that. All I suggest is that we level the playing field, that we be treated just like we treat others. Our products into Colombia face a tax, a tariff, which makes them more expensive. It makes it harder for our small businesses and farmers to be able to sell into Colombia. Yet their products come here virtually duty free. And so by approving this deal, it will level the playing field, but more importantly, it will help our entrepreneurs and help our workers.

There's another cost because of congressional inaction, and that is, Colombia is one of our strongest allies in our neighborhood. And it's important to support our friends. And it's important to send a clear message that we stand for rule of law and democracy, which is precisely what President Uribe believes in. He's fighting these terrorists and these narcotraffickers. He has strengthened

the rule of law. He's protecting his labor leaders. He is a strong, solid leader.

Yet if we turn down this deal or if this deal does not go forward, it would send a variety of messages: One, America can't be counted on to stand next to its friends; two, it will embolden the voices of false populism in our neighborhood; and three, it will make it harder for President Uribe to do what is necessary to make sure Colombia is a safe place for people to live. I fully understand that this is a tough political vote for some, but it's about time America sets aside petty politics and focuses on doing what's right for the United States of America.

So thanks for letting me come by, and thanks for hosting this very important meeting. I am confident the Prime Minister of Canada and the President of Mexico will really enjoy their stays in New Orleans. They will find what I have found, that it's a city not only of good food, good cheer, but it's a city of really fine people. God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:36 p.m. at Gallier Hall. In his remarks, he referred to Thomas J. Donohue, president and chief executive officer, U.S. Chamber of Commerce; Supriya Jindal, wife of Gov. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana; Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans, LA; Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada; and President Felipe de Jesus Calderon Hinojosa of Mexico.

Proclamation 8242—National Day of Prayer, 2008

April 21, 2008

*By the President of the United States
of America*

A Proclamation

America trusts in the abiding power of prayer and asks for the wisdom to discern God's will in times of joy and of trial. As we observe this National Day of Prayer, we recognize our dependence on the Almighty, we thank Him for the many blessings He has bestowed upon us, and we put our country's future in His hands.

From our Nation's humble beginnings, prayer has guided our leaders and played a vital role in the life and history of the United States. Americans of many different faiths